



Identity crisis: All citizens may have to piece the card together again

Politics Of Identity

The problem with compulsory identity cards is that, like the rain, they fall equally upon the just and the unjust; upon the good and godly and the enemy within. Even the most authoritarian government has to pause before it risks alienating its electoral support by a demeaning and expensive form of universal supervision.

But it has been known for a long time that Home Office and DSS technocrats were interested in the possibility of equipping clients of the state and other doubtful characters with cards electronically coded not only with their entitlements but with other data that they themselves should preferably not know about. National insurance cards, issued since 1984, have in fact had a 200-letter capacity for coded information. To get compulsorily carded and coded, however, an individual would first have had to fall on hard times. Many enemies of the state would slip through.

The possibility of making everyone carry an identity card has now re-entered the political agenda as a spurious spin-off of the problem of football crowd control. The

original idea of subjecting about 5m people to such a regime in order to keep a few hundred hooligans out of football grounds (and presumably in the all-day pubs instead), is now making its way through parliament as the government's Football Spectators Bill.

But the football authorities' argument that only a national identity card scheme for *all* citizens could work, which seemed at the time to be no more than a way of demonstrating the absurdity of the government's proposal, recently surfaced in a bill sponsored by, among others, Police Federation spokesperson Sir Eldon Griffiths. In February, the bill mustered 37 votes but, denied governmental support, failed to get a second reading.

The bill was of frightening simplicity. It would have made it a crime for anyone aged 12 or over not to have an identity card and not to produce it to the police on demand, 'so as to ... ascertain its validity': in other words to check on your entitlement to hold the card, not merely to discover your name. The home secretary would have had power not only to lay

down what particulars the card was to contain but to exempt named classes of people from the bill.

In spite of the fate of this piece of parliamentary private enterprise, the issue is unlikely to go away. It is no longer directed at football hooligans. What is the real agenda?

For a start, the belief that Britain is awash with illegal immigrants is not confined to eccentric members of the judiciary, and the very process of issuing cards would enable whole communities to be combed out in search of proof of entitlement to be in Britain before a card is issued. There may be resistance from police on the beat, initially, to enforcing South African-style pass laws for the whole population, especially when South Africa has had to modify its own pass laws; but there are tempting possibilities of coding identity cards with data, verified and unverified, that will make law enforcement easier, if not more accurate or just. The Association of Chief Police Officers sees 'no disadvantages in principle (*sic*) or in practice' in the proposal.

Then there is the poll tax. It is one thing for people to forfeit their right to vote as a trade-off for not registering as taxable adults. It may be another for them to be unable to get identity cards, and to be unable to draw benefit or

obtain public or social services for want of them, unless they register for poll tax too.

In other words, the primary purpose of an identity card is not to identify its bearer (no doubt all German spies had them between 1939 and 1945 when they were obligatory for everyone resident in Britain): it is to register the holder's citizenship, and it carries the corollary that to lack one is to be an outlaw.

For those who do have cards, the coded data they may carry are without limit and effectively beyond control: creditworthiness, HIV status, subversive tendencies ... They can do silently what Malaysia already does openly: issue different-coloured cards to people with criminal convictions and 'political offenders'.

Through the eyes of a government bent on erasing dissent and punishing outcasts, identity cards for all (or most) are an attractive but risky expedient, for nobody can be sure how far Middle England will resist this incursion into its way of life. Although the government's present stance is that this sort of incursion is not cost-effective, the stance may change in years to come.

There is an alternative, however, which the government is now exploring - voluntary identity cards. The idea is not quite as soft as it at first seems. If those organisations which control public or private services and supply goods decide to do so, they can effectively make a voluntary system compulsory by refusing to deal with people who cannot produce an identity card. If Whitehall can make the cards attractive to these bodies, for instance by encoding enough useful data on them, the government will have achieved through the market a new dimension in social control. The beauty of it will be that nobody will have to be fined or go to jail for not having an identity card: they will simply go short of the things they need in order to live. There's freedom for you. •

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